

That's the spirit

Tours and tastings on tap at Quad Cities' microbreweries, small-batch distillery

By Katherine Rodeghier
Daily Herald Correspondent

"This is Iowa. We grow corn," says Ryan Burchett of Mississippi River Distilling Co. That was the argument he used to persuade the state to change its laws governing hard liquor, a break it had long given to Iowa wineries. "Grapes are not a big crop around here," he tells visitors touring his distillery. "But grain? Just look around."

Changes in the law allowed the micro-distillery owned by Burchett and his brother to offer free samples and sell their products in their store. And with that, the tiny distillery became a big tourist attraction in Le Claire, Iowa, a river town on the fringe of the Quad Cities. A little more than a year after it opened in December 2010, Burchett was able to give up his day job as the on-air meteorologist for a Davenport, Iowa, TV station and devote himself full time to the family business. He



COURTESY OF KATHERINE RODEGHIER
Sean McQueen pours visitors a sample of the first batch of bourbon distilled last fall at Mississippi River Distilling Co.

tells visitors he doesn't regret the decision, just don't joke about the weather — he's heard it all before.

Whatever the weather, you can spend a pleasant few hours visiting the Quad Cities' only distillery and its handful of microbreweries scattered along both sides of the Mississippi River. Map out your own beer and spirits tour — leaving the driving to someone else, of course — and you'll not only sip some quality products, you'll feast on some fine pub food.

On guided tours of Mississippi River Distilling, you'll learn about the milling and cooking of grain, the fermentation, distillation, blending and aging process. Have a look at the big, copper still, custom made in Germany where the Burchett brothers traveled to learn the fine points of micro-distilling. All the spirits made here come from locally grown corn, wheat, barley and rye.

The mash left over from the process isn't wasted, Burchett tells those on his tour. It goes to local farmers as cattle feed. "We have the happiest cows in Scott County," he says.

Local is a big deal to the Burchetts, who've perfected a "grain to glass" method. Each small-batch bottle of vodka, gin, flavored whiskey and bourbon is numbered. Look up the number in batch notes on the distillery's website and you'll find the name and location of the farmer who grew the grain. The oak barrels used to age bourbon are made from trees cut in Illinois and Iowa. Even the artwork on the walls of the distillery comes from local artists.

At the end of the tour, free samples in the tasting room allow you to test your taste buds. Don't miss a sip of River Baron Artisan Spirit. Its sweetness comes from corn. That hint of butterscotch? That's wheat.

Beer more to your liking? Head south into the Quad Cities proper where four microbreweries create their own brands of craft suds for sale.

Blue Cat Brew Pub opened in 1994 in the Arts and Entertainment District in Rock Island, making it the second-oldest brew pub in Illinois. Brother

and sister owners, Martha and Dan Cleveland, named their pub for the blue catfish that live in the Mississippi River just a block or two from their front door. Six beers brewed on-site are on tap daily — regulars such as Wiggid Pig Wheat and Big Bad Dog Ale — along with some seasonal brews.

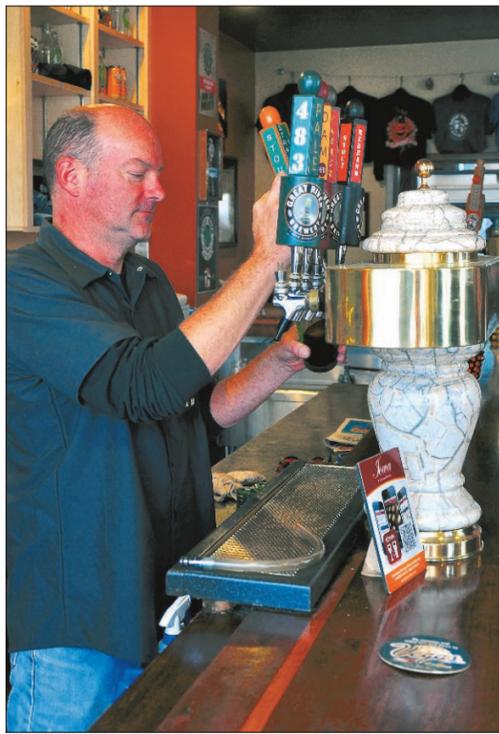
Blue Cat's lunch menu ranges from light vegetarian dishes to hearty pub fare. The Blue Cat BLT, made with house bacon smoked in apple wood, is a standout. Four times a year the Blue Cat organizes a beer dinner — a five-course meal with each course paired with beer.

In Moline, Ill., the Bent River Brewing Co. serves pub fare from a turn-of-the-last-century Italian Renaissance building in the National Registered Historic District not far from John Deere Commons. A second location, in a former car wash in Rock Island, doesn't serve meals, but has a cozy tasting room where you can sample beer in four, 5-ounce flights for \$5. Choose from its flagship beers — Mississippi Blonde, American Wheat, Oatmeal Stout, Pale Ale — or one of its specialty brews, such as Jalapeno Pepper Ale that has a bit of a spicy kick. For a jolt of another sort, try Uncommon Stout infused with coarse-ground coffee.

An outbuilding on the lot of the tasting room houses the Uncommon Beverage Station, a drive-through facility where you can pick up a growler of your favorite beer or a cup of gourmet coffee made from the same beans used in the stout.

Across the river in Davenport, Iowa, Front Street Brewery also has two locations. Its English-style brew pub, in what was the Bucktown red-light district in the 1920s, draws happy-hour crowds with discounted pints and half-price appetizers. Locals rave about the Slow Roasted BBQ Pork Nachos made with pork rubbed with salt, sugar, chili powder and garlic and roasted for 24 hours.

Last summer the brewery opened a tap room a few blocks away in the Freight House, an old warehouse complex that once housed goods brought in by trains. It's located next to riverfront green space where festivals take place in Le Claire



COURTESY OF KATHERINE RODEGHIER
Dann Cornelis mans the taps in the Brewer's Lounge at Great River Brewery in Davenport, Iowa.



COURTESY OF KATHERINE RODEGHIER
Order four, 5-ounce flights of Bent River Brewing Co. beer at its tasting room in Rock Island.

Park and the Quad City River Bandits play minor-league baseball at Modern Woodmen Park.

No food is served at the Front Street Brewery tap room (you can pick up a sandwich next door at Fresh Deli by Nostalgia Farms), but you can taste the full range of Front Street Brewery beers. Try Old Davenport pilsner or the top seller, Raging River Ale, a hoppy English-style ale named from the flood of 1993.

Just a few blocks away, Great River Brewery set up its brew kettles in an



COURTESY OF MISSISSIPPI RIVER DISTILLING CO.
The shiny still at Mississippi River Distilling Co. was custom-made in Germany.



COURTESY OF GREAT RIVER BREWERY
After operating a brew pub in Iowa City, Iowa, the owners of Great River Brewery transformed an old gas station into a brewery in Davenport, Iowa.

old gas station in 2009. You can take a free tour of the microbrewery on Friday nights and Saturday afternoons if you call

ahead to make arrangements. Sample craft beers brewed on-site in the Brewer's Lounge. Eight beers are in constant



PHOTO BY KATHERINE RODEGHIER
Handles on the tap at Blue Cat Brew Pub in Rock Island are decorated with the figure of a blue catfish.

If you go

Getting there: The Quad Cities area is about 180 miles from suburban Chicago.

Distillery: Mississippi River Distillery, 303 N. Cody Road, Le Claire, Iowa, (563) 484-4342, mrdistilling.com. Free tours and tastings on the hour daily from noon to 4 p.m.; evening event on the first Friday of every month.

Microbreweries and brew pubs: Blue Cat Brew Pub, 113 18th St., Rock Island, Ill., (309) 788-8247, bluecatbrewpub.com. Open 11 a.m. to 2 a.m. Monday through Saturday.

Bent River Brewing Co., brew pub 1413 Fifth Ave., Moline, Ill., tasting room 512 24th St. Rock Island, (309) 797-2722, bentriverbrewery.com. Brew pub open 11 a.m. to 3 a.m. daily; tasting room open 3 p.m. to 2 a.m. Monday through Thursday and noon to 2 a.m. Friday through Sunday.

Front Street Brewery, brew pub 208 E. River Drive, Davenport, Iowa, tap room 421 W. River Drive, Davenport, (563) 322-1569, frontstreetbrew.com. Brew pub open 11 a.m. to 11 p.m. Monday through Thursday; 11 a.m. to midnight Friday and Saturday; 11 a.m. to 9 p.m. Sunday. Tap room open 3 to 10 p.m. Tuesday through Friday; noon to 10 p.m. Saturday and Sunday.

Great River Brewery, 332 E. Second St., Davenport, (563) 529-6464, greatriverbrewery.com. Brewer's Lounge open 4 to 9 p.m. Monday and Tuesday; 1 to 9 p.m. Wednesday; 1 to 11 p.m. Thursday; noon to 11 p.m. Friday and Saturday; noon to 6 p.m. Sunday.

Where to stay: Hotel Blackhawk, 200 E. Third St., Davenport, (888) 525-4455, hotelblackhawk.com. Reopened two years ago after a multimillion-dollar renovation, the 130-room landmark 1915 property has modern amenities and a hip vibe. Check out the Bix Bistro, Spa Luce and, in the basement, a vintage bowling alley and martini lounge. Winter room rates start at \$129.

work, including cleanup of the mighty Mississippi that rolls on just a block away.

• Information for this article was gathered during a writers' conference sponsored by the Quad Cities Convention and Visitors Bureau.



COURTESY OF MISSISSIPPI RIVER DISTILLING CO.
Garrett Burchett takes visitors on a tour of Mississippi River Distilling Co., a micro-distillery he and his brother opened in Le Claire, Iowa.

production with seasonal brews rotating throughout the year. Try 483 Pale Ale or Roller Dam Red Ale, named for the world's largest roller dam operating nearby at Lock and Dam 15.

Had enough alcohol? Great River also makes River Rat Root Beer, a frothy soft drink with intense root beer flavor. Buy one and you're contributing to a good cause. A portion of each sale goes to Living Lands & Waters for environmental